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The Song of Disappearance: Memory, History, and Testimony in the Poetry of Antonio Gamoneda

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The beginning of Antonio Gamoneda's book-length poem, "*Descripción de la mentira*" (1977) 'Description of the Lie' includes an enigmatic allusion to testimony: "Huelo los testimonios de cuanto es sucio sobre la tierra y no me reconcilio pero amo lo que ha quedado de nosotros" (*El* 176) 'I smell the testimonies of all that is filthy on earth and I do not reconcile myself but I love what is left of us.'¹ The statements contained within this line pose at least three questions: Who or what is "all that is filthy on earth"? What is "left of us"? With whom or with what is there no reconciliation? The poem does not provide enough context to answer these questions. Upon a first reading of the text, it is impossible to identify or characterize the name of that which is deemed "filthy," the remains to which the verb to leave alludes, and the circumstances surrounding the estrangement that the reference to reconciliation presupposes. Reserve envelops the line and multiplies the questions: To whom does the personal pronoun "us" refer? Who cannot be reconciled? Who gives these testimonies? Who receives them? The personal deictics thrown into relief by these queries hint at a series of silences or absences. Moreover, the fact that the line mentions "testimonies" increases the sense of textual reserve. After all, any reference to testimony fosters the expectation that some direct and true knowledge will be conveyed. Yet we do not know what these singular "testimonies" are based on, nor do we know their content, their bearer, and their recipient. The mere mention of them shows that the text remains silent not once but many times. As a result, the silence kept by the line becomes ever more resonant. Although

it interpellates us from the page, calling upon us through the use of the first person plural “us,” the line falls silent time and time again. It is, literally, a reticent line.

Gamoneda was born in Oviedo in 1931. Three years later he moved to León, a Spanish city that in 1936 would become “a privileged location” for the repression of those faithful to the Republic at the hands of the insurgents (Gamoneda, “En Asturias” n. pag.). At the age of five, he witnessed the disappearance of prisoners in León’s convent of San Marcos, a prison he would later call a concentration camp (*Lugar* 15). Gamoneda published his first poems in 1949 and began *Descripción de la mentira* a few weeks after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco. The poem, composed between 1975 and 1976 in Boñar and León, is inflected by testimony, history, and memory: its writing constitutes not only Gamoneda’s “testimonio de un tiempo histórico” ‘testimony of a historic time’ that begins in July of 1936 and ends with the transition of Spain to democracy, but also illustrates how this transition stirs up the process of memory (Gamoneda “Entrevista” n. pag.).² Therefore, the autobiographical account inscribed in *Descripción de la mentira* covers the first years of Francoist repression—the time of silence between 1936 and 1945 that meant the continuation of war as a work of cultural destruction (Richards *Time* 3). Time of silence is a pertinent description here insofar as *Descripción de la mentira* “procede del silencio” (Gamoneda *Lugar* 78) ‘comes from silence.’ In 1975, Gamoneda had not published poetry for twelve years: “Durante quinientas semanas he estado ausente de mis designios, / ... silencioso hasta la maldición” (*El* 175) ‘For five hundred weeks I have been out of touch with my intentions, / ... silent until damnation.’ Miguel Casado, the critic who has done the most to bring Gamoneda’s work out of silence, characterizes his poetry as a “strategy of reticence”: theoretically significant facts are silenced so as to show what “en la realidad, fuera de condiciones culturales, es sustantivo” (58) ‘in reality, outside of any cultural condition, is substantial.’ Thus, testimony and the limits of representation that reticence presupposes are traits that define Gamoneda’s poetry.

In a study of Paul Celan’s poetry, Geoffrey Hartman takes into account the possible ties between testimony and the limits of representation: “We cannot read Celan’s life from his work: how then

is that work related to the Holocaust? Can so reticent an art with a style that marks an absence be a form of testimony?" (Hartman 161). These questions are relevant here because Gamoneda's reticent poetry is also deeply shaped by historical and biographical circumstances. To what extent can we read his life in his poetry? How does *Descripción de la mentira* relate to Spain's recent history and, in particular, to the time of silence under Francoist repression? Is it possible for poetry such as his, marked by silence and absence, to constitute a form of testimony?³ Hartman's response to the reticence of one of the Holocaust's most prominent poets illustrates the context evoked by my re-reading of Gamoneda's work in 2005. My reception of his poetry was inscribed in the horizon of expectations created by recent critical reappraisals of the history, testimony, and memory of the Holocaust, as well as the changing historical memory of the Spanish Civil War, Francoism, and Spain's transition to democracy.⁴ Historian Tony Judt, showing concern for "the place of recent history in an age of forgetting" (*Reappraisals* 1), stated in 2005 that Spain tacitly turned a blind eye to "the painful memory of the civil war" in the twenty years that followed its transition to democracy, and that only now, in the twenty-first century, has a public debate about the war and its results begun (*Postwar* 829-30).⁵ Studies on memory and related concepts such as trauma, testimony, monument, specters, forgetting, and repression have proliferated in historiography about the period between the Spanish Civil War and the transition to democracy (Suleiman 5). For Michael Richards, cultural phenomena that historians of contemporary Spain should take into account include "violent acts, the level of consequent trauma and the inability to forget" ("Limits" n. pag.). Cultural studies about repression and the transition to democracy have also benefitted from recent approaches in memory studies (Ferrán 16). Following Judt's lead, in 2006 historian Santos Juliá denounced the fact that Spain was living under the "empire of memory" because what had happened was less important than the memory of it, and facts had yielded to their representations, which acquired a kind of "existencia autónoma, independiente de los hechos representados" ("Bajo el imperio" 7) 'autonomous existence, independent from the represented facts.' In 2006, Juliá sharply differentiated between the discourses of history and memory: while history aims to "conocer,

comprender, interpretar o explicar y actúa bajo la exigencia de totalidad y objetividad” ‘know, understand, interpret or explain, and acts under the demand of totality and objectivity,’ memory tries to “legitimar, rehabilitar, honrar o condenar y actúa siempre de manera selectiva y subjetiva” (“Presentación” 17) ‘to legitimize, rehabilitate, honor or condemn, and always acts in a selective and subjective manner.’ The debate over the historical memory of the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist period gathered momentum at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The passing of the Law of Historical Memory by the Spanish Congress in 2007 is important in this context. Since 2000, the emergence of groups of civil activists has brought about an “explosion in Republican memory” (Graham 141). Prominent among these groups is the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, which was founded in 2003 as a consequence of the opening of a common grave near León two months earlier. Shortly after, in 2004, the Pozo Grajero Association unveiled a plaque to commemorate fifteen firing squad deaths that took place in the Boñar cemetery.

León and Boñar are the only toponyms that appear in *Descripción de la mentira*. These, and the years 1975 and 1976, are the only historical or geographical markers that, in the paratextual threshold in which they are embedded, allow us to remember or imagine a specific context for the poem. Aside from the author’s name, León and Boñar are the only proper names that may help us interpret the enigmatic and ghostly deictic expressions that mark the text as a whole and characterize references to testimony in particular. The links between text, paratext, and context also formed my horizon of expectations when I reread Gamoneda’s poetry in 2005. Knowledge about the debate over historical memory stirred my curiosity about the reception of *Descripción de la mentira*, including readings technically unrelated to the historical context—or, as Casado states, “outside of any cultural conditions”—stemming from its publication in 1977 and subsequent dissemination at the end of the century.⁶ Gamoneda’s poetry was gradually integrated into the debate over historical memory in Spain. In 2007, an excerpt from his book *Gravestones* appeared on a commemorative plaque installed in León in memory of those repressed by the Francoist regime.⁷ In addition, Gamoneda himself became a “place of memory”: the slow public

recognition of his work culminated in 2006 when he was awarded the prestigious Cervantes Prize, in the midst of the controversy over the Law of Historical Memory. Some opponents of the law criticized the prize because, in their opinion, there existed links between a law that seemed to rekindle Civil War sentiment and the institutional activities and political affinities of the prizewinning poet.

Both the popularity acquired by Gamoneda in this debate and his statements about the relationship of recent Spanish history to his writing can distract from the fact that *Descripción de la mentira* still seems reticent, even “incomprehensible.”⁸ The text concludes with a baffling assertion that, in the current context of historical memory, should serve as a warning: “Este relato incomprendible es lo que queda de nosotros” (*El* 222) “This incomprehensible account is what is left of us.” “What is left of us” echoes the previously cited text about “testimonies” that appears at the beginning of the book. The poem, “this account,” is also “what is left of us” now, in the present of reading signaled by the deictic “this.” This concluding line answers the interpellation previously inscribed in the enigmatic reference to “testimonies” at the poem’s beginning: “what is left of us.” The “account” nears its end remembering its “incomprehensible” character. As a singular form of testimony, the poem only manages to witness the enigma that surrounds the “testimonies” alluded to in the beginning of the text, not the historical event itself. In this sense, the line “this incomprehensible account is what is left of us” is also a “reticent testimony,” and the poem does not contribute to the goals of either history or memory, according to Juliá’s definitions. The aim of this “incomprehensible account” is not to “interpret or explain,” as history does. Rather, the poem presents the kind of “autonomous existence” Juliá attributes to representations of the Civil War and Francoism. Indeed, Gamoneda’s account somehow fits Juliá’s definition of memory: it is selective and subjective. Yet, if the explanatory and communicative elements disappear from the text, the purpose of *Descripción de la mentira* cannot be that of memory, if its aim is to “legitimize, rehabilitate, honor o condemn” (“Una conversación” n. pag.). Reticence, defined as the withdrawing of “objective facts” from the text, is a major component of Gamoneda’s poetics. Although *Descripción de la mentira* may seem to refer to a “circunstancia colectiva o circunstancia histórica”

‘collective or historical circumstance,’ the informative aspect of the matter—the denunciatory memory often inscribed in politically engaged poetry—is not explicit in the poem (“Una conversación” n. pag.). Thus, Gamoneda’s “incomprehensible account” can hardly be called historical memory, if this term for our relationship to the past implies a search for reparation (Juliá “Presentación”).

For Gamoneda, memory is always the memory of loss, a memory that is simultaneously a memory of death, and his poetry aims at representing memories of death, of suffering, and of horror (Gamoneda “Barjola”). If in Spain historical memory serves as “the moral ground for political demands and condemnations” (Loureiro “Pathetic” 226), and a perspective based on past grievances is contributing to the distortion of historiography, *Descripción de la mentira* differs from current dominant discourses about historical memory insofar as it constitutes a form of testimony that resists being reduced to ideological statements of any sort. Archives do not offer an immediate reflection of the real, but rather, a form of writing mediated by syntax and ideology (Didi-Huberman 152). In this light, the form of testimony articulated through Gamoneda’s poem seems relevant, though not because history’s aim “to know, understand, interpret” has been discredited.⁹ Gamoneda’s singular testimony reminds us of the impossibility, “under the demand of totality and objectivity,” of giving a full or “true” account of pain and death in the past (Engdahl 10). If historiography can be argued to create a comprehensible “theatre of shadows” where the absent ones are the players, then *Descripción de la mentira* is an incomprehensible account because its aim is to attest to absences and silences as they really are (Ricoeur 365). The poem is a contradictory testimony inasmuch as the disappeared inscribed in the text appear as disappeared, and the shadows haunting it resist elucidation. For Gamoneda, poetry’s function is to comply with and heighten this discursive practice. Only after writing *Descripción de la mentira* did he supply the facts that would help to explain the reference in the text to a “collective or historical circumstance” (“Una conversación” n. pag.). In a recent reminiscence about some intellectuals with whom he was associated during Francoism, Gamoneda stated: “Ya casi todos somos únicamente sombras: los suicidas activos y pasivos; los muertos ensangrentados y los muertos de pena; los que están sin

estar; los que no acaban de irse" (*Cuerpo* 104) 'By now almost all of us are merely shadows: the active and passive suicide victims, the bloodied dead, and those saddened to death; those that are here without being here; and those that never fully go away.' The poet has also described how these "shadows" responded to the transition to democracy in Spain:

Lo que se ha extinguido no es más que la conciencia errónea y deseante de una verdad "que iba a venir." Entonces, las palabras ya no son más que el canto de la desaparición, es decir, de "lo que queda de nosotros": la perplejidad de contemplar nuestros actos (que pensábamos revolucionarios) "en el espejo de la muerte." (*Cuerpo* 177, original emphasis)

What has been extinguished is nothing more than the wishful but mistaken conscience of a truth that "was to come." Thus, words are nothing more than the song of disappearance; that is, of "what is left of us": the perplexity of contemplating our own acts (which we thought were revolutionary) "in the mirror of death."

"The song of disappearance" chanted by the "shadows" that have arrived at this eschatological contemplation from beyond the grave defines *Descripción de la mentira*. If memory is always consciousness of loss, and thus consciousness of going "hacia la muerte" 'towards death,' poetry is a unique art of memory inasmuch as the poet contemplates his acts "in the mirror of death" (*Cuerpo* 24). This art of memory consists of withdrawing the objective facts that do not bear witness to suffering, disappearance, and death. For any interpretive approach to the memory of Gamoneda's "shadows," it seems appropriate to remember Primo Levi's warning in *The Drowned and the Saved*: no one ever returns to describe his own death.¹⁰ The surviving "shadow" capable of saying "now / the perfection of death is in my spirit," explicitly poses the question of the memory of death: "Vi la muerte rodeada de árboles ... // ¿Qué harías tú si tu memoria estuviera llena de olvido ...?" (*El* 206, 201) 'I saw death encircled with trees.... // What would you do if your memory were full of forgetting....?'¹¹ Like Celan and Levi, Gamoneda writes in spite of all. The question *Descripción de la mentira* poses is, to use Georges Didi-Huberman's words: how does one give testimony from within

death?¹² The answer to this question entails a contradiction: testimony implies telling “in spite of all, that which is impossible to tell entirely” or, more precisely, “to create, in spite of all, the possibility of a testimony” (Didi-Huberman 104-05). Gamoneda’s poem offers at least the possibility of an ethical discourse in the face of the frightening trap of history consisting of the impossibility of speech for the integral testimony of death; if, in these circumstances, criticism depends on “a dialectical approach capable of handling both speech and silence, both lack and remains, both the impossible and, in spite of all, testimony and archive,” Gamoneda can be said to create, “in spite of all, the possibility of a testimony” from silence and lack (*Images* 104-05).¹³

Prosopopeia is the figure of speech that makes the invisible visible and gives a face to the disappeared or the inexistent. According to Paul de Man, prosopopeia is the fiction of a voice that comes from beyond the grave—“an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply, and confers upon it the power of speech” (“Autobiography” 75-76). Apostrophe makes evident the dialogical nature of prosopopeia (Loureiro, “Autobiografía” 144). In *Descripción de la mentira* prosopopeia affords the possibility of conversing with death: “En los establos olorosos donde me envuelve la oscuridad yo recibo a la muerte y conversamos...” (183) ‘In the scented stables where darkness wraps around me I receive death and we converse...’ The intimate register of Gamoneda’s dialogue reveals the ethical element characterizing prosopopeia as a response and responsibility towards the other. Testimony is thus inscribed in an exchange that establishes a dialogic situation. Far from being reduced to asserting “I was there,” testimony implies a speech act addressed to a person: “believe me” (Ricoeur 164). In *Descripción de la mentira*, this type of dialogue is marked by a silent testimony—a reticent testimony preceding the account given by the poet, the survivor-turned-shadow (Agamben 161). This dialogic situation is brought about by ghostly faces that, in turn, invoke an incredulous poet: “No creo en las invocaciones pero las invocaciones creen en mí” (*El* 173) ‘I don’t believe in invocations but invocations believe in me.’ Thus, the incredulous poet’s testimony consists, contradictorily, of lending voice to the silent testimony given by dead or absent figures that believe in him.

They command him to speak even as he lends voice, or creates the possibility of lending it, through a simile: “como si consistieran ... en la unidad de mis palabras” (174) ‘as if they consisted ... of the unity of my words’. It is the suspicion or doubt expressed by the poet, his incredulity, and the discredit that surrounds the invocations, that, again contradictorily, make the accreditation of testimony possible (Ricoeur 164). The certification of the testimony “is not complete except through the echo response of the one who receives the testimony and accepts it”: the incessant dialogue articulated by Gamoneda’s testimony as speech act also depends on this alternative between “confidence and suspicion” (164). Only when the “unity of my words” becomes “una amistad dentro de mí mismo” (*El* 174) ‘a friendship within myself’ is the poet able to “smell the testimonies”. This reciprocal relationship is necessary because testimony always involves the risk of fictions and lies—the possibility of literature and, specifically, of poetry (Derrida “Demeure” 27, 56). According to J. Hillis Miller, novels and poems are speech acts. What the narrative voice states is accompanied by an implicit assertion: “I swear that this is what I saw, that it really happened.” In this sense, every literary work constitutes a form of testimony. Poetry entails a performative speech act, a promise to which the reader responds with another speech act that seals a dialogic pact as a willing suspension of disbelief in the threshold between truths and lies. “I promise this is true: believe me”; “I promise to believe you” (38-39).¹⁴ Gamoneda’s poetry is testimonial because it is a speech act involving a reciprocal relationship between the poet and an absent or voiceless entity.

The apostrophe that establishes the dialogic situation articulated by testimony is the constitutive speech act of most poetry. Poets create their textual presence deictically, through images of voice or invocations (Culler 140-41). Later in *Descripción de la mentira*, the poet proposes a sort of impossible dialogue when he addresses an anonymous, disappeared second person: “Tú invocabas al chamariz” (*El* 196) ‘You invoked the call-bird’. Prosopopeia consists here of an apostrophe that the surviving poet addresses to a suicide victim: the invocation is an evocation. The poet brings a now voiceless person into the present by preserving an echo or memory of an incessant invocation, the peculiar invocation that this unnamed person used to, in turn, address the “call-bird.” The name *chamariz* signals the

bird's ability to imitate the song of other birds and attract them with its call. The fact that the name *chamariz*—originally Portuguese for call-bird—is regional underlines the singular, almost untranslatable experience of the witness. Thus, the intimate dialogue created by the poet articulates, in a simultaneous and contradictory, recurrent and reticent fashion, the testimony to a disappearance. The poem becomes the call or song of an incessant disappearance. As Giorgio Agamben argues, both poets and witnesses believe language is what remains after loss, what survives “the possibility, or impossibility, of speaking” (161). In *Descripción de la mentira* the practical impossibility of speaking with the dead or the disappeared is inscribed in two pacts. The poet reminds the reader and himself that, while “la tortura ha pactado con las palabras” (*El* 175) ‘torture has made a pact with words,’ he has kept silent. In spite of this silence, the poet then asserts: “Voy a pactar con tu desaparición” (191) ‘I will make a pact with your disappearance.’ The “pact,” another speech act, coincides with the act of apostrophe, enacting a “song of disappearance”—a song of shadows and anonymous faces, both present and future ones. This “song” fits de Man’s definition of prosopopeia. Moreover, if prosopopeia means giving a face to an anonymous entity because the original face is absent or inexistent, then the figure of speech that provides a face, and hence a voice, to this entity is catachresis (“Lyrical” 57). Gamoneda’s poetic thought resists reflexive thought inasmuch as it comes from “lo Desconocido” ‘the Unknown’ and “realiza lo irreal” ‘it realizes the unreal’ (“Discurso” n. pag.). *Descripción de la mentira* is catachrestic because it attests to absences as they really are, giving a secondary or posthumous voice to anonymous entities that come from “the Unknown.”

Catachresis implies a promise. To say that one gives voice to what is voiceless or sees what is invisible amounts to proposing a pact with the listener, a speech act: “believe me.” “I saw death” is performative, enacting the impossibility of lending an image to what is imageless. It constitutes a singular act of testimonial speech. In line with Agamben’s reading of Levi’s testimony, witnesses capable of offering a true or complete testimony of death do not come back to give an account of their experience, or they come back mute. Gamoneda’s witnesses, “the active and passive suicide victims, the bloodied dead, and those saddened to death, those that are here without

being here; and those that never fully go away,” find themselves in a similar situation (*Cuerpo* 104). Only those who return, the ones that remain, the survivors, the pseudo-witnesses, can give an account of death consisting of the song of disappearance (Agamben 120). But their account is incomplete and somewhat incomprehensible: a catachresis. Gamoneda’s account is catachrestic because it contains the remains coming “from the silence” of “invocations.” Contradictorily, these remains move spectrally in the “espesor” ‘thickness’ of his ears—in a singular, anonymous “theatre of shadows” that are “there without being there,” that “never fully go away,” or that are only present here, in the poem.¹⁵

One response to the promise implied by catachresis is to show respect for the strangeness that surrounds any unique account. This strangeness is a feature both of testimonial accounts and of the poetry that Gamoneda alchemically writes, in spite of all, with “la lengua de los opresores” (*Lugar* 54-55) ‘the language of the oppressors.’ The dialogic situation established through invocation in his poetry involves the reader and, therefore, the critic. The response and responsibility towards the other defining the ethical element in apostrophe also concerns the critic when he is interpellated through the deictic “you” about “what is left of us,” the “incomprehensible account” that is *Descripción de la mentira* : “¿Qué sabes tú de la mentira?” (*El* 188) ‘What do you know about the lie?’. Criticism should be mindful of this ethical element in its attempt to comprehend the singular testimony inscribed in Gamoneda’s poetry (Loureiro “Autobiografía” 144). Miller warns that literary studies can hide the singularity and strangeness of literary discourse by “turning it into the familiar” (33). Familiarization would seem to be the aim of those studies on testimony in which reading allows for “the conscious integration of traumatic events.” In this model, the critic is seen as a mediator and the “act of memory” taking place between witness and reader is “potentially healing because it generates narratives that ‘make sense’”: “the traumatic event of the past needs to be made ‘narratable’” (Bal x, original emphasis). Gamoneda’s singular account does not lend itself openly to healing or reconciliatory readings.¹⁶ One could say, with Adorno, that “hardly anywhere else does suffering still find its own voice, a consolation that does not immediately betray it” (“Commitment” 88). The strangeness of Ga-

moneda's account persists in spite of all: "all that is filthy on earth" still leaves an enigmatic trace for politically-oriented discourses that may attempt to make it familiar.

In his critical essays, Gamoneda defends the value of enigma in the work of art, as opposed to the facts that are in the concept, the explicit and "objective facts" that would contribute to the creation of an informative "relato temático" 'thematic account': "el enigma es una suplencia eficacísima, una significación plenaria, infinitamente abierta, ante la que nos manifestamos intensamente receptivos y activos" (*Cuerpo* 205-06) 'enigma constitutes a most efficient substitution, a plenary signification, infinitely open, before which we show ourselves intensely receptive and active.' The receptivity that this "infinitely open" signification fosters in the reader should be attuned to the singularity of the witness's account.¹⁷ As Renaud Dulong argues, the message of testimony tries to keep the past "as enigma, as scandal, as interpellation" (Engdahl 10). Thus, in the threshold between comprehension and incomprehension, testimony and literature converge: "The witness talks of something that is incomprehensible in the hope that someone else will make it possible to understand and with the certainty that any explanation must be rejected as inadequate" (Engdahl 10). Poetry and testimony coincide in the fact that their singular character is the condition of their universality. The example par excellence of an experience that is irreducibly singular and thus all the more universal is the experience of death, as Celan's poetry illustrates (Bonnefoy 209). One of the truths that Gamoneda's contradictory poetic testimony remembers is the enigma that history hides: the experience of death (Adorno *Aesthetic* 120). According to Walter Benjamin, truth is not "a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it" (*Origin* 31). Like the alchemist—a key figure in Gamoneda's work—the critic can see the text as a funerary pyre and pay attention not to the ashes, but to "the flame itself: the enigma of being alive" (*Illuminations* 4-5). Therefore, an important function of critics in their approach to Gamoneda's singular testimony is to throw into relief the enigma of the past that the witness tries to keep alive in the present time. The critic becomes a unique kind of witness who offers his or her own account within the possibilities afforded by historical context, while also attempting to afford future readers

the possibility of showing themselves “intensely receptive” to the poem. Thus, the channel of testimony is kept “infinitely open”: the channel created by the “song of disappearance” allows the enigma of the past to live through the present towards the future. Indeed, the poet reminds readers of their own singular, enigmatic absence: “I will make a pact with your disappearance” (*El* 191). Through the specular play of deictics readers also come from “the Unknown,” as though we were reading a necessarily “incomprehensible” testimony to our own future death (“Discurso” n. pag.). This account of “what is left of us” is “incomprehensible” insofar as it bears witness to the impossibility of offering a full, truthful rendition of the past.

In the current context of the debate over the relationship between memory and history, this sense of the adjective “incomprehensible” is important: the past is impossible to encompass. Like every testimonial account, Gamoneda’s poem is never fully closed, not only because the witness can still tell and retell his tale until the day he dies, but because for the poet the past itself changes. Gamoneda does not write about his childhood; he writes it. He does not represent his childhood; he presents it (*Armario* 5). The past is a form of writing and Gamoneda’s testimonial writing transforms the past as if the past were the present: his learning of old age is “la forma que adoptan ahora en mí el pasado y sus sombras” (*Armario* 5) ‘the shape that the past and its shadows now take in me.’ If memory is “always consciousness of loss,” and, thus, “consciousness of going towards death,” the poem is a reminder of death both in the past and in the future—a *memento mori* (*Cuerpo* 24). Gamoneda’s testimonial poetry continues to be enigmatic, secretive, and even cryptic in spite of critical interpretations—like the “remains” in Celan’s poetry, it offers itself only to “confirm that there is something secret there, withdrawn, forever beyond the reach of hermeneutic exhaustion” (Derrida *Sovereignities* 26). In *Descripción de la mentira* the poet decides to meet with what is offered to him in the “distribución de los residuos” (*El* 177) ‘distribution of residues.’ Critics should explain this “distribution,” while still respecting the “residue” for what it is: a part of an “incomprehensible” whole, remains of a destruction “beyond the reach of hermeneutic exhaustion,” as open and incomprehensible as the contradictory memory of death inscribed in Gamoneda’s text: “Mi memoria es maldita y amarilla como

el residuo indestructible de la hiel" (*El* 182) 'My memory is cursed and yellow like the indestructible residue of bile.' Like Benjamin's angel of history, the critic can gaze on the wreckage, "attempt to awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed," but he or she will move towards the future without being able to make the growing "pile of debris" whole again (*Illuminations* 257-58). Critical approaches to Gamoneda's work would do well, therefore, to respect the singularity and strangeness of its poetic testimony (Engdahl 8). They should be mindful of the contradictory experience of the survivor that gives testimony in spite of all, even while feeling haunted by the ghostly faces of the past until he himself becomes a specter touched by death. One of Gamoneda's recent poems is a disturbing reminder of such an experience: "No quiero ser mi propio extraño, estoy entorpecido por las visiones. Es difícil ... trabajar en la retracción de rostros desconocidos hasta que se convierten en rostros amados y después llorar porque voy a abandonarlos o porque ellos van a abandonarme" (*El* 465) 'I don't want to be my own stranger. I'm hindered by visions. It is hard ... to work on the withdrawal of unknown faces until they become loved faces and then to weep because I'm going to abandon them or because they are going to abandon me.' The enigmatic faces that invoke the poet in *Descripción de la mentira* keep changing and coming back to haunt him. In spite of all, the poet does not reconcile himself: he keeps writing what is left of us, creating and re-creating the possibility of a testimony—a song of disappearance.

Notes

1 References to Gamoneda's poetry, hereafter cited as *El*, are to *Esta luz*, his collected poetry. Translations of *Descripción de la mentira* and *Lápidas* 'Gravestones' are Donald Wellman's. Some have been adjusted. All other translations are mine.

2 Boñar is located in the province of León. As we shall see, Boñar is both a trigger to the act of writing the poem as well as an ambivalent mark of its textual closure.

3 According to Gamoneda, *Descripción de la mentira* is both a biographical and a hermetic book ("En la vejez" n. pag.). Gamoneda also believes that poetic

thought cannot falsify biographical reality (*Armario* 236).

4 Critic Susan Suleiman argues that the Holocaust has become a template for the investigation of collective memory in various parts of the world (2).

5 Judt frames recent Spanish history within the “Thirty Year War,” highlighting continuities in the conflicts between 1914 and 1945.

6 See *Edad* (*Poesía 1947-1986*), an edition of collected poetry published in 1987 for which Gamoneda won the Spanish National Poetry Prize in 1988.

7 Gamoneda unveiled this plaque outside his house in León where he has lived since 1934. Reticently enough, the poet believes that this plaque is the first testimony in Spain of something that is related to his writing (“En Asturias” n. pag.). Gamoneda has also pointed out that *Gravestones* can be read as a footnote to *Descripción de la mentira* (“Una conversación” n. pag.).

8 In 1994, Mayhew asserted that *Descripción de la mentira* gave the impression of a “highly detailed but ultimately undecipherable symbolic code” (83).

9 The discredit is the target of Juliá’s criticism.

10 For Derrida, survival is an intrinsic part of testimony (“Demeure” 45).

11 These lines illustrate the triple deictic that structures testimony (Ricoeur 163-64).

12 Gamoneda has explained the silence that preceded *Descripción de la mentira* with the question of whether there is anything more incongruous than to try to create “obras de arte con el miedo a la muerte” (*Cuerpo* 106) ‘works of art death while fearing it.’

13 I have adjusted the translation of Didi-Huberman’s text.

14 As Derrida argues, testimony is “poetic or it is not, from the moment it must invent its language and form itself in an incommensurable performative” (“Demeure” 83).

15 According to Gamoneda, words “retumba[ro]n en [su] cabeza” ‘resound[ed] in [his] head’ while he was walking in Boñar. This significant interior resounding stirred his poetic thought (“Entrevista” n. pag.).

16 In LaCapra’s terms, Gamoneda’s poem departs from a redemptive notion of mourning insofar as it does not allow for the overcoming of melancholy (*Writing* 150-51). In this sense Loureiro’s statement is relevant: “I have never felt reconciled—nor do I need to—nor have I forgotten, nor will I ever forgive anyone for the thirty years of repression” (“Pathetic” 226).

17 The irreducible singularity of the verbal body introduces us into “the enigma of testimony, next to the irreplaceability of the singular witness” (Derrida *Sov-*

ereignities 67).

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